



The Calcutta Medical College, 1822–1897: Medicine, social psyche and the making of modern citizenry by Jayanta Bhattacharya

Delhi: Primus, 2025. ISBN: 9,789,368,830,627 (hbk), Pp. xxiv + 430. Price Rs. 1750/-

Madhuri Sharma¹

Received: 29 July 2025 / Accepted: 13 August 2025 / Published online: 19 September 2025
© Indian National Science Academy 2025

Jayanta Bhattacharya's book on the Calcutta Medical College is a narrative of the transition of *gurukula* learning *paramparā* to the institutionalization of 'modern' healing and medical practice. The author of this monograph provides a thoroughly researched history of the evolution of the Calcutta Medical College (hereafter CMC), from its antecedent, the Native Medical Institution (NMI), founded in 1822. CMC underwent several phases, marked by dissection controversies, and professionalization emerged in the form of "hospital medicine" in 1897. This research also connects medical history, colonial episteme, and socio-political transformation in Bengal in the nineteenth century. Contributing to the broader canvas of the history of science and medicine, this work is not merely about a medical school, but also as an instrument of colonial governance for disciplining the bodies and the social psyche, tied to the colonial creation of "modern" citizens in nineteenth-century Bengal.

Deepak Kumar, in the foreword of this book, observes that CMC was undoubtedly the first medical college in South Asia that transcended traditional institutional history. It presents nuanced and complex interconnections between socio-economic, political, cultural, and medical aspects inside and outside the institution in 19th-century colonial Bengal.

Extensive exploration of archival sources to reconstruct institutional history is one of the major strengths of this work. As a trained physician-historian, the author

traces the transformation of the Native Medical Institution (NMI), established in 1822, to the founding of the CMC in 1835. Based on government records, clinical casebooks, and educational reports, Bhattacharya documents that Lord Bentinck's committee abolished NMI, consciously shifted from a hybrid vernacular mode of instruction to the anglicized allopathic model.

Chapter One, titled *Medical builders and the gestation of hospital medicine*, explored how the idea of hospital medicine became a reality after the French Revolution. Merging of medicine and surgery, emphasis on hands-on approach to learning, and the invention of new medical technologies such as the stethoscope brought a revolutionary transformation in the medical field. Chapter Two, *The beginnings of the native medical institution*, highlights the embryonic development of hospital medicine and public health in India. It indicates the shift in episteme by showing a change in terminology from 'training' to 'education.' Interestingly, it shows that following the colonial 'downward filtration theory,' modern medical education aimed to create a new elite class of Indian practitioners to disseminate medical knowledge to the broader population, with minimal direct engagement with traditional medical practices. Following Chapter Three, *The abolition of the native medical institution and the beginning of the Calcutta Medical College*, describes the intellectual transition under W.B. O'Shaughnessy's leadership. The emphasis was on producing skilled practitioners rather than independent thinkers, reflecting the utilitarian goals of the colonizers.

In Chapter Four, *From inception to the first dissection*, the author argued that the first public anatomical dissection conducted by Madhusudan Gupta in 1836 was the biggest break in the medical epistemology. This initiative of touching a dead body by a *Brahmin* represented pedagogical innovation and a cultural provocation, intricately intertwined with caste, bodily purity, and religious anxieties. Centering

Dr Madhuri Sharma teaches History at Bharati College, University of Delhi. Her area of specialization is social history of medicine in India. She authored '*Indigenous and Western Medicine in Colonial India*', CUP, 2012, reprinted in 2014.

✉ Madhuri Sharma
madhuri.sharma@bharati.du.ac.in

¹ Department of History, Bharati College, University of Delhi, Janakpuri, New Delhi 110058, India

around Gupta, this dissection created huge controversy and debates over modernity, tradition, and colonial hegemony.

The strength of this book lies in its framing of Western medical knowledge as a tool to discipline or control, to transform the social psyche. Taking from Foucault's notion of "medical gaze," the author poignantly argues that the CMC played a crucial role in generating a new medical episteme, i.e., bodies became clinical objects (case no.), and the vocabulary of diagnosis, observation, and examination reshaped the Indian notion of illness, health, and selfhood.

Chapter Five, *From first dissection to the first examination*, details the establishment of assessment systems at CMC. Chapter Six, *Further progress of the Calcutta Medical College and the emergence of modern public health*, examines the growth of public health and laboratory medicine in India and the inclusion of women in medical roles, such as at the lying-in hospital at CMC. Moving further, Chapter Seven, *Reorganization and the first educational sojourn of India*, documents the curricula and teaching methods updates. Chapter Eight, titled "*The transition: From Calcutta Medical College to the Medical College and Hospitals*," discusses the paternalistic and racially biased practices ingrained in the medical education system. Chapter Nine, "*Confronting hurdles: Female medical education and nursing*," focuses on the gender-specific obstacles faced by women in entering the field of medicine. Chapter Ten, "*Early momentum and later stasis in medical research: The Suez canal, term theory and commercial interests*," examines how the Suez Canal's opening transformed imperial trade and public health. It discusses quarantine, contagion, and sanitation within the larger framework of imperial governance.

In his concluding chapter, Bhattacharya argues that with the rise of scientific medicine, patients lost their identity and became just case numbers, while the modern doctor—seen as a man in a white coat with a stethoscope—became a symbol of authority and control. Medicine, he suggests, was not just about healing but also became a tool for the colonial state to manage and shape its population, turning subjects into modern citizens. The book offers a detailed and engaging look at how Western biomedicine was introduced and developed in colonial Bengal, especially through medical education, dissection practices, and the shift from traditional to English-based training.

In the above well-structured and articulated chapters, Bhattacharya shows that the older structure of medical knowledge was replaced by the hospital-based clinical model, gradually delegitimizing Indian healing systems such as *Ayurveda* and *Unani*. The CMC strategically supported the colonial state's bio-political project of control and normalization through record-keeping, statistical analysis, and disease classification and categorization.

Although the book details a pedagogical shift inside the institution as a site for producing 'modern citizen', it

undermines and neglects the larger socio-economic context, such as how villagers, rural patients, or poor Indians perceive CMC and its graduates. In other words, the analysis is based on urban-dwelling upper-caste, English-educated Bengali '*bhadralok*' men, thereby sidelining the responses of subalterns such as poor, slum dwelling patients, rural populations, practitioners of *Ayurveda* and *Unani*. It could have been more nuanced if the author had included the voices of people who resisted or reinterpreted Western medicine.

The creation of a 'modern citizen' by CMC was overemphasized, seemed more idealistic, and was not sufficiently substantiated by evidence. The relationship between biomedical discipline and democratic citizenship seems to be suggestive only and was not grounded in public spheres.

Additionally, showing commendable international medical developments, the book remains Bengal-centric with limited comparison with similar institutions in Madras, Bombay, or elsewhere in India. This reduces the probability of evaluating and assessing whether the course of development of CMC was a part of a larger colonial strategy or a unique Bengal phenomenon.

The author develops and expands the foundational insights of his research on David Arnold's *Colonizing the Body* (1993), which explored the interconnections of medicine, race, and colonial power. Arnold emphasizes state-led intervention in controlling epidemics and army health, whereas Bhattacharya focuses more on institutional epistemology, pedagogy, and medical psychology. His previous articles, such as "The genesis of hospital medicine in India" (Bhattacharya, 2014) and "The first dissection controversy" (2011), provide an important base for the book's key themes. Emphasizing "hospital medicine" as a new medical regime resonates with the study of historians like Roy Porter and Andrew Cunningham. This book is an addition to the scholarship that views colonial medical institutions as a locus of knowledge production and cultural negotiation.

In short, Jayanta Bhattacharya's *The Calcutta Medical College, 1822–1897* is an important and meticulously researched book that explores how colonial medical education changed Indian society during the nineteenth century. It shows how the Calcutta Medical College played a key role in shaping modern ways of thinking about the body, health, and citizenship while creating new professional and social hierarchies. The book is based on rich archival sources and includes images, charts, and sketches, making it informative and accessible. Although some of its arguments about creating modern citizens could use more evidence and broader comparisons, the book stands out for its originality and depth. It will interest not just historians of medicine, but also sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and anyone curious about modernity, education, and institutional change in colonial India.



Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

